

FOOD & CULTURE

The best champagne and sparkling wine to buy for the holidays

Tiny bubbles have gotten us through plenty of hard times over the past couple of centuries and 2020 will be no exception, COVID-19 notwithstanding. Because our tasting panel hasn't been able to convene since early March, the sparkling wines recommend today are individual taster's touts, but I've relied upon scores from high-profile critics to single out the best of the best.

Bollinger Special Cuvée NV

19.4 (9.4 for quality, 10 for value)

Taster's take: "On the palate, very complex, toasty flavors, highlighted by pear, with hints of walnuts. Long, rich, yet amazingly balanced finish."

About the wine: James Bond's favorite go-to bottle of bubbles, from a house founded in 1829, is a blend of pinot noir (60 percent), chardonnay (25) and pinot meunier sourced from mostly Grand Cru vineyards.

Critical acclaim: Received eight scores of at least 90, including a 96 from Decanter, which wrote, "unparalleled among the entry-level, non-vintage blends of every Champagne house, short of ascending to the mesosphere of Krug."

Ayala Brut Brut Majeur NV

19.2 (9.2 for quality, 10 for value)

Taster's take: "Dry with zesty acidity, green apple, citrus and pie crust. Clean finish."

About the wine: From a house with a colorful and complicated history that dates to 1850, it's a classic pinot noir-chardonnay blend sourced from both grand- and premier-cru vineyards.

Critical acclaim: Received six scores of at least 90, including a 92 from Wilfred Wong of wine.com.